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Justine Dandy & Ted Nettelbeck

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# *The Relationship Between IQ, Homework, Aspirations and Academic Achievement for Chinese, Vietnamese and Anglo-Celtic Australian School Children*

**JUSTINE DANDY & TED NETTELBECK**, *Department of Psychology, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia*

**ABSTRACT** *Flynn (1991) proposed that students from Asian cultural backgrounds typically achieve at higher levels than non-Asian students with the same IQs. This study investigated relationships between IQ, study time, educational and occupational aspirations, and academic achievement among Australian school children (n = 160) from Chinese, Vietnamese and Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. Mathematics grades for Chinese and Vietnamese Australian children were higher. They spent more time studying and were more likely to desire an occupation requiring tertiary qualifications than Anglo-Celtic Australian peers. Consistent with Flynn's hypothesis, students from Asian backgrounds obtained higher mathematics grades than their Anglo-Celtic Australian peers with the same IQ. However, study and occupational aspirations formed only part of a more complex socio-cultural package that contributed to group achievement differences. Parents' support for studying and aspirations may interact with these factors to produce high achievement.*

The high academic and occupational attainments of Asian Americans are well documented (e.g. Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Hsia, 1988; Suzuki, 1980; Vernon, 1982). Asian American students are over-represented among national competition prizewinners, in university and high school graduation rates, and in acceptance to prestigious North American universities. This effect extends to academic achievement at the elementary school level (e.g. Caplan *et al.*, 1992), and there is evidence of high levels of educational attainment among Asian immigrants in other Western countries (Birrell & Khoo, 1995; Walkey & Chung, 1996). These achievements appear to be most pronounced for immigrants from East and Southeast Asian countries. Cross-national studies have also shown superior academic performance in some curriculum areas by

students in these countries relative to other nations (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 1996). The effect is most evident among students from societies with a Confucian cultural heritage, and is particularly concentrated in mathematics and reading.

Explanations for these high achievements can be grouped into two broad categories:

- group differences in intellectual abilities, because of genetically based differences (Vernon, 1982; Lynn, 1987) or selective migration (Hirschman & Wong, 1986);
- socio-cultural influences including the role of education for social mobility (Sue & Okazaki, 1990), and Confucian beliefs in the value of education and the importance to achievement of working hard (Caplan *et al.*, 1992).

Flynn (1991) has challenged the proposition of generally superior Asian intelligence, on grounds that IQ data from previous research were inaccurate comparative measures of intelligence. Confirmed generational gains in IQ (e.g. Flynn, 1999) have underscored that test norms become out of date, resulting in higher IQs for more recent samples. Flynn (1991) re-analysed previous IQ research among Asian Americans, and concluded that mean IQs of Chinese and Japanese Americans approximately equal the North American mean of 100. Moreover, Flynn (1991) determined that the outstanding achievements of Chinese and Japanese Americans revealed a marked IQ/achievement gap, a conclusion supported by Stone (1992).

### Relative Functionalism

One possible explanation for higher Asian educational achievements is based on the role of traditional cultural values for learning and education (Mordkowitz & Ginsburg, 1987). However, there is little research demonstrating a relationship between these variables and ethnic group differences in academic achievement. Moreover, Sue & Okazaki (1990) have argued that such theories are inadequate because interaction between imported traditional cultural values and majority culture values cannot be ignored. In other words, the educational achievements are demonstrated within Western societies and explanations should take account of the economic and social positions of Asian groups in the new country, Asian cultural values, and the interaction between these. Sue & Okazaki's (1990) alternative theory of relative functionalism has attempted to accommodate both cultural and sociological factors. The theory holds that immigrants attempt to exploit opportunities not available in their homelands, with the ultimate goal of upward social mobility, by way of education. An emphasis on education to aid social advancement is not limited to Asian immigrants, but Sue & Okazaki proposed that education as a means to advancement complements existing Confucian values. In addition, they argued that education becomes regarded as the primary means for this social mobility when other avenues are blocked, so that for Asian Americans educational attainment becomes a *functional* means of achieving social status, *relative* to alternatives. Support for this proposal comes from findings that Asian American families place greater value on education and have higher educational aspirations and expectations than other ethnic groups, including the Anglo-American majority (e.g. Chen & Stevenson, 1989).

Sue and Okazaki also proposed that high educational achievement among some Asian American groups reflects a traditional cultural belief that effort will be rewarded with success. This theory can accommodate ethnic group differences in micro-level

cultural factors like time spent studying and educational aspirations. A consistent finding has been that students from East and Southeast Asian backgrounds spend significantly more time studying than Anglo-Celtic peers (e.g. Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Caplan *et al.*, 1992).

### Aims, Predictions of Present Research

Few studies have examined the predictive validity of IQ for the achievements of students from Asian backgrounds and the first aim was to do this. Secondly, we investigated the roles of study time, and occupational and educational aspirations in these students' achievements. Study time was selected to reflect the first component of Sue & Okazaki's (1990) theory: that Asian persons from Confucian societies believe that academic effort will be rewarded ('If I study hard, I can succeed'). The second component of the theory—'education is the best way to succeed'—was equated with students' educational and occupational aspirations.

Based on Flynn's analysis, higher levels of academic achievement were predicted for Vietnamese Australian and Chinese Australian students than for Anglo-Celtic Australian peers matched for IQ. Furthermore, Sue & Okazaki's theory predicted that these Asian Australian students would spend more time studying than Anglo-Celtic Australian peers. It was also predicted that Asian Australian students would have higher educational and occupational aspirations, and this effect would be unrelated to parents' educational and occupational backgrounds.

### Methods

#### *Participants*

There were 160 participants: 29 Chinese Australian, 56 Vietnamese Australian and 75 Anglo-Celtic Australian children [1] enrolled in grades 6 or 7 within metropolitan primary schools. The majority (92%) attended seven government primary schools, with  $n = 13$  attending a non-government school. Average age was 11.67 years ( $SD = 0.73$ ). Gender distribution was 80 females and 80 males overall, and approximately equal within ethnic groups.

Two groups of Anglo-Celtic Australian students provided separate comparisons for Chinese Australian and Vietnamese Australian participants. This was necessary because the Chinese and Vietnamese students generally lived in different geographical locations with associated socio-economic differences (Beer & Cutler, 1995). Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 1 consisted of 46 participants from lower SES backgrounds (parents' level of education and occupational status) for comparison with the Vietnamese Australian group. Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 2 consisted of 29 participants from higher SES backgrounds for comparison with the Chinese Australian group. The general pattern of parental educational and occupational status was consistent with these comparisons, with the higher socio-economic groups scoring markedly above the lower groups. Within socio-economic groups, Anglo-Celtic levels tended to be higher than for Asians, but comparison groups were clearly more similar to each other than to the other groups. In any case, these differences could only serve to reduce, not enhance, predicted outcomes.

### Measures

Academic achievement was measured using teacher-assessed school grades. Using a 6-point rating scale from 1 ('a beginning level') to 6 ('an extended level'), teachers indicated achievement and understanding in; oral language, listening and reading, spelling, written language, mathematical concepts, mathematical problem solving, social studies and science. Correlations among ratings for these eight curriculum areas ranged from  $r = 0.50$  to  $r = 0.87$ . Three achievement variables (range 1–6) were constructed from these ratings:

- overall achievement score, the mean across the eight areas;
- a mathematics score, the average from the two mathematics ratings;
- a language score, the average from the four language ratings.

Internal reliabilities for the mathematics and language scores were high ( $\alpha s = 0.92$  and  $0.93$ , respectively).

Participants completed Raven's Progressive Matrices 1962 revision (60 items) and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) Intermediate Test-F (ACER, 1980; 75 items). A questionnaire examined children's educational and occupational aspirations, by asking whether they wished to attend university (Yes/No), and 'What sort of job would you like to have when you grow up?' Study time was recorded in a purpose-designed, self-report diary maintained for 4 weeks. Participants indicated time spent studying in half-hour blocks, on a daily basis. Correlations between weeks were high, ranging from  $r = 0.79$  to  $r = 0.91$ , justifying the use of a weekly average in analyses.

### Procedure

Participants attended on two occasions over 1–2 weeks (depending on the number of participants in each school). They first completed the Progressive Matrices followed by the questionnaire and study diaries were distributed. At the second session participants completed the ACER Intermediate Test. Both sessions were held in a classroom with groups of 10–20 students. Study diaries and grades were collected from the school 4 weeks later.

## Results

### Group Differences

Vietnamese Australian and Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 1 children did not differ significantly on any of the intellectual ability measures. Chinese Australian children scored significantly higher on the Progressive Matrices than their Anglo-Celtic Australian counterparts [ $t(56) = 2.24$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ]. According to Australian normative data, this difference translates into approximately 8–9 IQ points (de Lemos, 1989). There were no group differences for the ACER test.

Chinese Australian and Vietnamese Australian children had significantly higher teacher ratings for mathematics achievement ( $4.70 \pm 0.92$ ,  $3.94 \pm 1.15$ ) than Anglo-Celtic Australian peers [ $4.02 \pm 0.98$ ,  $3.39 \pm 1.01$  for higher and lower socio-economic samples, respectively;  $t(100) = 2.52$ ,  $P < 0.05$  and  $t(56) = 2.73$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ]. There were no group differences for language achievement or overall achievement.

Although more Vietnamese Australian children (93%) indicated that they would

attend university compared to 84% of participants in Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 1, this difference was not significant [ $\chi^2 (1, n = 98) = 1.96$ ]. Responses from the Chinese Australian and Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 2 children were very similar.

Participants' preferred future occupations were categorised as either professional or non-professional, according to the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (McLennan, 1997). Chi-Square analyses revealed significant differences between the ethnic groups for these two categories, with Vietnamese Australian children more likely than the Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 1 children to nominate a professional occupation [ $\chi^2 (1, n = 96) = 7.07, P < 0.01$ ]. Similar results were obtained comparing Chinese-Australian and Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 2 participants [ $\chi^2 (1, n = 48) = 8.07, P < 0.01$ ]. In general, occupations nominated by Vietnamese Australian and Chinese Australian children had higher status than those nominated by the Anglo-Celtic Australian groups [ $t (92) = 3.25, P < 0.01$  and  $t (46) = 2.04, P < 0.05$ , respectively]. This effect was not a consequence of higher educational and/or occupational status among Chinese and Vietnamese parents.

There were significant differences between the ethnic groups for hours reported studying. Outcomes were: Chinese Australian mean = 11.99 hours per week (SD = 7.42); Vietnamese Australian, 8.55 hours per week on average (SD = 6.75); Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 1, 5.09 hours (SD = 3.90); and Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 2, 4.69 (SD = 2.15). These group differences were significant, with Vietnamese Australian children studying more on average than Anglo-Celtic Australian peers [ $t (77.02) = 2.91, P < 0.01$ ] and the Chinese Australian children studying more than Anglo-Australian counterparts [ $t (26.85) = 4.63, P < 0.01$ ].

### *Relationship Between IQ and Academic Achievement*

To test the hypothesis of differential predictive validity of IQ for the academic achievement of students from Chinese and Vietnamese backgrounds, the data were subjected to hierarchical multiple regression analyses. Based on the findings of ethnic group differences, achievement in mathematics was the outcome variable. Preliminary analyses confirmed the predictive validity of IQ for mathematics achievement because there was no difference in the slope of the regression equations for the different ethnic groups. Further analyses were conducted to examine the contributions of ethnicity, aspirations and study time to mathematics achievement.

To test whether ethnicity had a unique main effect on mathematics achievement, after controlling for IQ, additional regression analyses were conducted. IQ (average of Progressive Matrices and the ACER test) was entered first, followed by ethnicity. IQ was found to predict achievement in mathematics for all groups, irrespective of ethnicity ( $P_s < 0.01$ ). However, ethnicity was also a significant predictor in both comparisons ( $P_s < 0.05$ ), indicating that the Vietnamese and Chinese students obtained higher mathematics achievement ratings than Anglo-Celtic Australian peers with the same IQ. For the Vietnamese comparison, ethnicity contributed approximately 5% to the variance in mathematics achievement and approximately 11% for the Chinese comparison. These results suggest that for a student of average IQ being Vietnamese adds around 0.5 of a grade and being Chinese approximately 0.6 of a grade. Although small these effects are meaningful in relation to the 1–6 scale on which students' achievement was rated.

Additional hierarchical multiple regression analyses explored this ethnicity-related variance in mathematics achievement. IQ was entered at step 1 to control for differ-

ences in ability, study time was entered at step 2, followed by occupational aspirations at step 3. Ethnicity was entered at step 4. If the effect of ethnicity on mathematics achievement was due, even in part, to more time spent studying and/or higher aspirations, then these variables would significantly affect mathematics achievement and the effect of ethnicity on achievement would disappear.

The effect of ethnicity was not significant with study and aspirations in the regression equations. Aspirations added significantly ( $P < 0.05$ ) to the equation predicting mathematics achievement for the Vietnamese Australian and Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 1 children. However, aspirations did not make a significant independent contribution to the equation once IQ, study and ethnicity were included. A similar result was evident in predicting the mathematics achievements of Chinese Australian and Anglo-Celtic Australian Group 2 children. Thus, although including aspirations and study resulted in a significant change in  $R^2$  for the Vietnamese comparison and the Chinese comparison, respectively, neither variable made a significant independent contribution to the variance once the other variables were entered. This suggests that study, aspirations and ethnicity share variance in mathematics achievement. Therefore, although regression analyses suggest that study and aspirations are part of the ethnicity-related variance in mathematics achievement, it is difficult to tease out the contributions of each variable.

Regression analyses controlling for socio-economic differences investigated whether the relationship between IQ and achievement in mathematics differed for the two Asian Australian groups. These analyses confirmed that IQ was a significant predictor of achievement in mathematics among the Vietnamese Australian and Chinese Australian children ( $P < 0.01$ ), but found no difference between these groups when predicting mathematics achievement from IQ.

## Discussion

Results supported Flynn's hypothesised IQ/achievement gap (in mathematics) for students from Asian backgrounds and Sue & Okazaki's (1990) theory of relative functionalism. In particular, Chinese and Vietnamese Australian students reported spending considerably more time studying and had significantly higher occupational aspirations than Anglo-Celtic Australian peers. This latter effect was not a consequence of higher educational or occupational status among Chinese and Vietnamese parents.

### *The Gap Between IQ and Mathematics Achievement*

Despite similar IQs, Chinese and Vietnamese Australian children had higher teacher ratings for mathematics than Anglo-Celtic Australian peers. Regression analyses demonstrated that, although IQ was a predictor of mathematics achievement for all children, ethnicity also made an independent positive contribution. IQ tended to under-estimate mathematics achievement for the Chinese and Vietnamese children, supporting Flynn (1991) and Stone (1992). The relationship between IQ and mathematics achievement was similar within these ethnic groups, but as Flynn has suggested, IQ cannot cross cultural boundaries. This interpretation gained support from the regression analyses comparing the two Asian Australian groups. In contrast to the analyses involving the Anglo-Celtic Australians, those comparing the Asian groups found that higher mathematics achievement observed among Chinese Australian children was due to higher IQ only; there was no additional ethnic/cultural contribution.

Although the present study supported Flynn's hypothesised IQ/achievement gap,



results were limited to mathematics, and did not extend to language or overall achievement. In general, the strongest evidence of high achievement among students from East Asian and Southeast Asian backgrounds has been in mathematics although some studies have shown differences in reading achievement (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 1996). It is evident that schools in the People's Republic of China and Japan place emphasis on this aspect of the curriculum, and this may be reflected in immigrant parents' expectations for their children.

### *Relative Functionalism*

The present results provided some support for Sue & Okazaki's (1990) theory of relative functionalism. Consistent with previous research, both Asian Australian groups spent significantly more time studying than their Anglo-Celtic Australian peers did. The weekly averages for the Chinese Australian and Vietnamese Australian children were similar to the homework time spent by the Indochinese school students in Caplan *et al.*'s (1992) study.

Ethnic differences in occupational aspirations supported the second component of Sue and Okazaki's folk theory. Although Asian Australian students were not more likely to desire university education than Anglo-Celtic Australian counterparts, they had higher occupational aspirations. The preferred occupations were high status/high income professions like medical practitioner.

However, regression analyses did not support the prediction that the Chinese Australian and Vietnamese Australian children obtained higher mathematics grades directly because of more study time or because of higher aspirations. Despite expected ethnic group differences in these variables, neither made a significant independent contribution to mathematics achievement. Instead, homework and aspirations shared variance in mathematics achievement with ethnicity. Motivational indices such as aspirations and study time are possibly part of a socio-cultural 'package' that enhances achievement for these students.

It is possible that Asian Australian children were spending more time studying because their parents expected them to. Several teachers commented that many Chinese and Vietnamese parents complained when they thought their children were not receiving enough homework (in contrast to the Anglo-Celtic Australian parents who frequently complained of the opposite), and many Asian Australian children said their parents expected them to study for a set time each day, irrespective of homework set by the teacher.

Arguably, teachers' ratings to measure school achievement is less than ideal. Although this procedure was found to have good internal reliability among the curriculum areas within both language and mathematics, it is accepted that teachers' ratings will be more subjective than standardised measures and therefore more vulnerable to bias. Thus, the observed ethnic group differences in mathematics achievement may have been due to 'positive academic stereotyping' by teachers (Hsia & Peng, 1998, p. 333) and the present results should be interpreted with caution. Also, despite evidence that the samples were representative of the South Australian Chinese and Vietnamese communities, the generalisability of the present results may be limited by the relatively small sample sizes. However, the present study is one of the few examples of direct evidence for Flynn's hypothesised IQ/achievement gap. The Chinese and Vietnamese Australian school children obtained higher mathematics achievement ratings than predicted on the basis of their IQs. Furthermore, despite ethnic differences in study

time and occupational aspirations, these factors did not explain the gap between IQ and achievement scores for the Chinese and Vietnamese schoolchildren. The failure of IQ to predict achievement in mathematics across cultural boundaries may be due to a more complex group of social and motivational factors, including academic effort, and parental expectations and attitudes, that may serve to enhance the achievements of students from Chinese and Vietnamese backgrounds.

*Correspondence:* Dr Justine Dandy, School of Psychology, University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia (e-mail: justine@psy.uwa.edu.au).

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## NOTES

- [1] Chinese Australian children were those whose parents identified themselves as ethnic Chinese and Australian residents. First generation immigrants were born in Malaysia ( $n = 5$ ) and Hong Kong ( $n = 5$ ), with smaller numbers (total = 7) of immigrants from Thailand, the People's Republic of China, Singapore, Brunei, Macau, and Vietnam. Average Australian residency for the first generation was 6.61 years ( $SD = 3.11$ , range = 2–13 years). Twelve were born in Australia, i.e. second generation. The Vietnamese Australian category was similarly defined. There were 24 first generation immigrants, most born in Vietnam. The average residency in Australia for the first generation was 7.08 years ( $SD = 3.47$ , range = 1–13 years). Thirty-two participants were second generation. Anglo-Celtic Australian students were defined as second (or more) generation Australian; that is, they and their parents were born in Australia, and their grandparents were born in either Australia or Great Britain including Ireland. All had Anglo-Celtic cultural heritage.

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